

Superintendent to urge lawmakers against Senate Bill 16

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5:15 pm CST November 14, 2014

A month after she sounded the alarm on a controversial piece of proposed legislation that would strip Fairmont School District 89 of more than \$250,000, Superintendent Dr. Sonya Whitaker announced she was headed to Springfield to testify against the measure.

Senate Bill 16, the School Funding Reform Act of 2014, was passed by the Illinois State Senate last May but is just starting to be considered by the State House.

According to its chief sponsor State Sen. Andy Manar, the bill aims to “streamline the current hodgepodge of funding sources into one funding formula that would account for school districts’ funding needs” and “better address student needs, such as socioeconomic background, language ability or special learning needs, while also accounting for a school district’s ability to raise funds locally.”

Critics across much of Illinois have derided it as little more than an attempt to take state education funds from middle-class districts and shift them to impoverished areas.

While the bill was designed to provide relief to chronically cash-strapped districts like Fairmont, the projected numbers have left Whitaker and board members baffled and even exasperated.

“This is a ‘careful what you wish for’ situation,” Whitaker said. “I embrace this idea that they are reconsidering the funding formula, because our state has the absolute worst education funding system in the nation, but the numbers as they stand right now [under the proposed revision] are counterproductive for Fairmont.”

Whitaker said she planned to urge lawmakers to “reconsider the formula for determining our poverty rate, including our free and reduced lunch rate” to get an accurate view of Fairmont’s needs.

She was expected to testify Nov. 18 at a joint hearing of two State House committees. Whitaker said she was “absolutely confident” that she would represent the district, its children and taxpayers well in Springfield.

District 89 Board President Joseph Ryan praised and thanked Whitaker for her leadership in fighting Senate Bill 16 in its current form, noting that those who came up with the new formula “did not do their homework.”

In other matters at Fairmont’s Nov. 12 meeting, district finance chief Kadir Dada rolled out numbers relating to the 2014 estimated levy, which he set at just less than \$2.9 million — up about 3.4 percent from the 2013 levy. The figures were for information only, and no board action was taken.

Board members also voted unanimously to increase the daily rate of pay for substitute teachers, from \$85 to \$95 a day. Whitaker said the move was needed to bring Fairmont more in line with rates paid by surrounding school districts. She said the increase was needed to enable the district to better compete for the limited number of substitutes available.

Also, in response to a question from board member Jeremy Burns, Whitaker said the district’s search for an instructional technology coordinator is ongoing. She noted that several candidates have applied but do not meet the district’s criteria.

Several questions were posed — but not immediately answered — by longtime board critics Ed Quasny and Joseph Dalpiaz. They sought answers on several matters, including refinancing the district’s debt, the school’s academic ranking and the whereabouts of board member Lorena Velazquez, who Quasny said he hasn’t seen in seven months.

- See more at: <http://www.lockportlegend.com/school/superintendent-urge-lawmakers-against-senate-bill-16#sthash.JcqXphW9.dpuf>